



GMOs

'Co-existence' or GM-free zones?

CAMPAIGN GOALS

- Governments should take all necessary steps to prevent contamination of conventional and organic crops by GM crops to ensure that alternatives to GM foods remain widely available to consumers.
- Governments should enact laws allowing for the creation of GM-free areas.

Why is contamination a concern?

Of greatest concern is that genetically modified (GM) pollen can blow onto the fields of non-GM crops. Canola and maize, for example, produce large amounts of pollen that can pollinate neighbouring crops.

Contamination of non-GM crops by GMOs can also happen during breeding, transport, propagation and processing of seeds.

The GM genes responsible for contamination are patented by the corporations that developed them. This means that crops containing these genes can become the property of the corporations that hold their patents. Farmers can be forced to pay for intrusive plants that pose a contamination threat to their non-GM crops.

Just as no one can predict the strength of the wind, there is no way of determining a guaranteed safe distance between GM and non-GM crops.

Research by the European Commission Joint Research Centre acknowledges that, for some crops, including canola, contamination will be impossible to stop and that organic production "would not be feasible" in a region with GM production.

Contamination can also occur when GM seeds from food aid or from GM test sites are released and planted.

Unless strong measures are put in place by governments, contamination will eventually eliminate the consumer's right to choose.

Cases of contamination

• Thailand and Hawaii: Papaya

Papayas in Thailand have been found to be contaminated with GM, even though GM varieties are not commercially grown there. The source of contamination seems to be the Thai Ministry's own Agriculture Research and Development Office.

The US state of Hawaii has found that commercial growing of GM papaya has led

to widespread contamination of the organic and conventional papaya industry. Hawaiian farmers report that cross-pollination is impossible to control. Hawaii has lost exports to Japan, which cancelled contracts for papaya for fear of GM contamination.

• Mexico: Maize

Biologists from the National Autonomous University of Mexico found the presence of transgenes in native corn in 33 communities from nine states. The contamination is likely the result of farmers planting some of the 5 to 6 million tonnes of US corn bought by Mexico or sent as food aid, according to the ETC Group, an environmental NGO.

• US: Wheat and canola

Wheat farmers in North Dakota living some 80 km from GM canola fields say that GM canola is a weed in their wheat.



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GM-free zones

Since contamination occurs so widely and easily, areas of farmland where no GMOs are grown must be established if consumers are to have access to non-GM food.

There are GM-free zone initiatives in virtually every European country. Over 100 regions and more than 3,500 sub-regions of Europe have declared themselves GMO-free.

However, EU Directive 2001/18 could prevent regions from remaining GM-free, unless based on voluntary agreements. Although the Directive allows regional governments to exempt 'geographical areas' from the introduction of specific GM crops, it cannot be used to gain blanket protection against the introduction of all future crops.

Rather, the exemption must be used on a case-by-case basis each time an application for marketing consent for a GM crop is made to the European Commission. Under the Directive, GM crop cultivation can only be prevented by member states in the presence of environmental or health risks. It cannot be done to conserve consumer choice alone.

A few governments, including Germany, Denmark, Italy and Luxembourg, have gone ahead and passed their own co-existence legislation. These provide for separation distances between GM and non-GM crops, liability for contamination, and other stipulations.

Similar regional initiatives have been passed in Tuscany, Italy, and the Austrian regions of Carinthia, Salzburg and Upper Austria. Debates around co-existence measures are also taking place in other European countries.



The new European Agriculture Commissioner, Mariann Fischer Boel, has recently stated that the EU should develop EU-wide guidelines for separation distances between GM and non-GM crops.

While these voluntary initiatives are encouraging, strict legally-binding rules on co-existence and liability are needed. Europe's GM-free regions need to be protected by law if consumer choice is to be meaningful.

Protecting GM-free crops: Germany

Stringent legislation to protect GM-free agriculture was passed by the German Parliament on 26 November 2004.

The law has been hailed a success for consumer protection and for farmers growing GM-free crops.

The highly-restrictive law regulating GM crops requires GM growers to publicly register the exact location of fields. It holds GM farmers financially liable for economic damage of non-GM crops from their GM crops. It also establishes rules for minimum separation distances and other safeguards.

The German Farmers Association has advised farmers not to cultivate GMOs because co-existence is not achievable.

The law has some serious loopholes. It fails to adequately address possible damage to the environment caused by GM crops. But despite its shortcomings, it is viewed as a potentially valuable model for other countries.

In California, citizen-led campaigns have resulted in the creation of GM-free zones in Mendocino, Trinity and Marin counties, with others likely to follow. The US biotech industry is aggressively lobbying government officials to have this movement quashed, now and in the future.

In Brazil, the Governor of Paraná, a major soya-growing state, is pushing for the state to declare itself GM-free.

In the Canadian province of Prince Edward Island, a government committee is soliciting public input to determine whether the province should go GM-free.



CALL FOR ACTION

• Urge policy-makers to be guided by the principle that no single system of agriculture – in this case, GM – should be allowed to threaten the existence of other agricultural systems (such as conventional and organic).

• If GM crops are likely to be introduced or are currently being planted, **press for strict co-existence rules and GM-free areas.**

• In countries where governments are considering the introduction of GM crops, **press for legal measures** to ensure that alternatives to GM will be available.

• In areas where co-existence between GM and non-GM crops has proven to be problematic, **press for a ban on GM crops.**

Sources

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